

Preservations of Silence in the Queer Archive

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Note: headphones must be used in order to hear the recording's binaural effect.

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On a limited-edition vinyl recording, one can hear musician Drew Daniel of the group Matmos coming out to his parents via telephone.^[1] Daniel's vulnerability is palpable from the trembling in his voice, though he gets right to the subject. Crucially however, we hear only Daniel's side of the conversation. In the gaps when his parents are speaking, we hear no voices at all, allowing the ambient sound of Daniel's room to come into play. When Daniel is not talking, there is a consistent sound which I take to be him fumbling with some object near the microphone — an index of his nervousness, which is then transferred to the listener. This brief, touching recording ends with a sudden change of subject. Daniel is beginning to explain why he has chosen this moment to come out; then, hearing something on the other end of the line that we cannot, he asks his parents, "What is that sound?" The track ends here, and the needle moves to the center of the record.

For us, that sound is silence. But it is not a silence that equals death, nor is it the "hush of the archive," Charles Morris's evocative metaphor for the elision of queer materials from historical research (147). Instead, in Drew Daniel's recording, the spaces left by silence suggest ways in which incomplete conversations and elided narratives allow for empathetic and embodied experiences of queer history and memory. I will here describe my own recording of an incomplete story, in order to suggest the possibilities of preserving productive silences in queer archives.

A main trope of gay historiography is that of making visible what was previously "hidden from history," to use the title of a prominent anthology of gay historical writings. The very first sentence of *Gay American History*, Jonathan Ned Katz's 1976 anthology of primary sources, neatly condenses this trope by conjoining sight and sound: "We have been the silent minority, the silenced minority — invisible women, invisible men" (1). Developed alongside this process of archival discovery was the "coming out" narrative of post-Stonewall activism which cast public self-identification as queer as a vocal and visual act.

More recent historical accounts, foregrounding the private or semi-public informal queer networks of communication throughout the twentieth century, suggest a precedent for queer oral history in an historically elusive “word of mouth.” From what Stuart Loomis terms “the wisdom of the aunties” in the intergenerational social milieu of American gay men in the 1930s to the sexual networks gay men and lesbians developed during World War II, to the coded visual and verbal messages gay men used to signal interest in one another in 1920s and 1930s urban centers, to the often imaginative folklore regarding such figures as Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman and Shakespeare, queer people were already communicating vital information, including their own histories, between one another.^[2] An interface between the pre-Stonewall era, in which oral histories and verbal communications were largely coded, ephemeral, and underground, and the post-Gay Liberation era, in which they were explicit and archived, is a useful model to consider how we might imagine different functions for archival materials in queer memory and history.^[3]

In this spirit, the queer archive has become a focus of the work of artists, many of whom seek to dislodge archival items from material fixity and linear narratives. Ann Cvetkovich details lesbian artists’ “counterarchive” — a radical use of archival materials not only to bring hidden stories into the open but to critique the archive itself (32-35). Since 2009, E.G. Crichton — the first Artist-in-Residence at the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society — has produced the project *Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive*, matching artists with particular archival subjects. Crichton’s linking of a “lineage” between present-day artists and historical subjects combined with the affective intimacy of “matchmaking” delineates a space for discovering and describing modes of queer life that are not commonly produced in the archive.

In April 2010, as part of the collective John Q, I co-presented *Memory Flash*, a one-day series of public events. Out of our archival research, we presented re-enactments or reconstitutions of four events relating to queer life in Atlanta in the 1950s and 1960s, in the spaces where they originally happened. The first of these events centered on a story told by artist Freddie Styles, contained in the Atlanta History Center’s collection of oral histories of pre-1970 queer life in Atlanta.

In this story, Styles talks of the Jolly 12, an informal social club of black gay men formed in the early 1960s, when Styles was a teenager. This group of twelve men would meet socially in a house on Wabash Avenue in the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood of Atlanta. When they left the house to go to a club, the men (all uniformly dressed in white shirt and blue pants) would line up by height and march down the street. As the men were familiar figures in the neighborhood, residents would banter with them from their porches and windows. As part of the group of older men, the precocious teenaged Styles learned from the “quick defensive wit” of the men’s public responses (Chenault et al). As the first “movement” of *Memory Flash*, Styles stood in the front yard of the original house on Wabash Avenue and told an expanded version

of this story, relating an oral history of his queer youth to the audience. While Freddie spoke, John Q, along with invited members of the community, slowly circled the crowd, dressed in white shirts and blue pants, recreating the original Jolly 12 walk. When Styles finished his story, he joined in with the walkers, completing a historical circle. While Freddie drew on the story he related concisely in his official oral history, his performance of it in *Memory Flash* was more discursive, nonlinear, and evocative.

During the events of *Memory Flash*, I wore a recorder — a microphone in each ear, going to a small portable minidisc recorder in my pocket. The microphones look like “earbud” style earphones and are unobtrusive visually. They create binaural recordings — different from stereo recordings in that the design of the two microphones, and their placement on either side of the head, create an audio document that locates the recording subject in the space of the recorded event. (In this sense, the person recording is not only the recorder but a subject as well. Thus, I refer to the person recording here as the “recording subject.”) This creates an immersive effect when listening back with headphones; often, listeners to binaural field recordings can mistake sounds on the recording for sounds that are taking place in their present moment. In this way, binaural recording creates a more subjective record of the recording subject’s experience of an event. It documents *movement* of the recording subject as well. In addition to drawing on the trope of silence in “the hush of the archive,” Charles Morris reflects on the potential of the archive for “*queer movement*: traversal of time and space, mobilization and circulation of meanings that trouble sexual normalcy and its discriminations” (147-48). His use of movement is metaphorical; via my portable field recordings of *Memory Flash*, I would like for a moment to extend this movement literally, into the streets, and into those historical social movements — Civil Rights and Gay Liberation — that are the context of Freddie Styles’ experience in the Old Fourth Ward.

As Freddie told his story that April day for a large crowd gathered on Wabash Avenue, I began the Jolly 12 walk around the circle, slowly at first, gaining momentum as the other marchers gradually fell in step behind me. Freddie expanded his story of the Jolly 12, contextualizing it in his larger development as an out gay teen in the neighborhood in the early 1960s. He spoke of a wide variety of familial and intimate relations — from a grandmother who was “shacking up” with a man to one of his own early affairs with an older man, to being “promised to the doorman” by older friends at gay clubs. Freddie’s talk of trysts and shacking up, delivered into a microphone in the front yard of a house with relatives and friends gathered to listen, in the same block where much of this happened, constitutes a temporary intervention — a lovely and ironic “counterarchive” to the elision of sexuality from so much archival work.

This embodied aspect of Freddie’s story is one way to frame my own recording of the event. I had decided to run the recorder constantly; I was interested in capturing liminal moments as well as the main events of *Memory Flash*. Here I found an analog to queer history, as

interstitial moments and spaces are often where queer people thrived historically. I was also influenced by Andy Warhol and other 1960s/1970s filmmakers whose style depended not on editing but on letting the camera run for the full length of the film roll, as well as by the composer John Cage's interest in nonintentionality and acceptance of all sounds. So the recorder was turned on at the beginning of the event, and remained on even when there was (supposedly) "nothing to hear." I thought perhaps I would catch Freddie's story as I was walking, preserving an oral history on the run, as it were. But something else happened.

Our Jolly 12 circular walk took us past Freddie, up the street a bit, then across the street and back up, crossing the street again and moving back to Freddie to begin another circle. Thus, as Freddie spoke I moved toward and away from him with the recorder. At the furthest point of the circle from Freddie, he is completely out of earshot. So the recording is a record of his voice fading in and out — a story fragmented.

The resulting recorded document presents a paradox: in re-enacting Freddie's walk, I missed his story of it. This quality of the recording captures the sense in which Freddie's story is one I may never be able to truly hear, just as our 2010 version of the Jolly 12 could not be like the original. Instead, this is a recording of a space where a story from long ago is being re-told. Fading in and out, graspable in some spots and not in others, it acts like a memory. It brings forward the other sounds of the space: airplanes, barking dogs, sirens, children playing. It brings in other senses too: an imaginative visual relationship to the space, a sense of *movement* through it. It dramatizes what Scott Bravmann calls "queer fictions of the past," which "like all representations... are *partial* perspectives...both incomplete and value-laden, telling us something but not everything about the world and doing so at a certain cost" (32). It tells us how history becomes (imperfect) memory, how memory becomes a reconstruction, and how the body is an archive of, and in, movement.

Silence is the method for these lessons — specifically, the queer silence of John Cage. As Jonathan D. Katz notes, Cage's silence (as exemplified in his key work *4'33"*, in which no sounds are intentionally produced by the performer) is *performative*. This silence, far from passive, is deeply ironic and subversive, being at once political and aesthetic. The silence produced by Cage's nonintention contains not only surrender but a subtle resistance. Its resistance is in its relocation of music to the act of listening rather than composing, making the listener aware of his or her own role in the process and refuting authoritative forms of musical discourse. It is "not another kind of music but a challenge to the construction of music itself." By extension, silence contains a surrender in that it is an "oppositional mode that refuses articulated oppositionality" (57). This refusal of explicit opposition to authority, while offering resistance that challenges authority's very ground, aligns with the subversive potential of the closet as a performative mode of communicating what could not explicitly be said. For Cage, direct political protest carried the danger of being "absorbed into the flow of power" (Cage, *For the Birds* 236 qtd. in Katz 60), while in

his composing he aligned himself with noise, as “noises escape power, that is the laws of counterpoint and harmony.” Therefore, silence for Cage was, like his ambivalent use of the closet, a performance: an intentional refusal of authority which made use of materials and ideas that were outside authority’s realm. As Cage put it in his *Lecture on Nothing*: “I have nothing to say / and I am saying it” (*Silence* 109).

Cage’s silence points as well to something different from gay culture’s metaphor of silence as death, as abjection, loneliness, and denial. Nino Rodriguez’s video work *Identities* is a forceful challenge to this dominant view. After taping an oral history interview with Thomas Padgett, a man living with HIV, Rodriguez edited out all of Padgett’s words, leaving us with only the moments between speech. As Padgett breaks down emotionally, yet is still denied language, we experience something closer to an emotional trajectory rather than a narrative. A moving, powerful work of empathy, *Identities* audaciously plays off the stereotype of the isolated, silent, and powerless “AIDS victim” to question whether all silences do, in fact, equal death. Its careful editing diverges from the nonintention of Cage’s work, but in subjecting an oral history to a strict aesthetic process, and then accepting the result, *Identities* exemplifies a Cagean silence.

So, I hope, does my recording of Freddie Styles’ story. I hope the circular path toward and away from this story makes room for a silence that will tell us something about queer memory and history. I hope that my own movement through the space of the story — as part of a Jolly 12 not much like the original — will help preserve not the telling of a story but the hearing of it, in the in-between spaces where queer people thrive. This recording preserves not an oral history but a “word of mouth” which can, I hope, enter into play with Freddie’s pointed inclusion of his sexuality in the public space of his story. Preserving these unruly relations, bringing the archive into life, can help us bring a different kind of silence into the archive.

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Note, n.d.

Notes

1. The recording, titled "Phonecall," is the final track on side one of the record Family Audio, released by the Lucky Kitchen label in 1998.

2. John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities: A Twentieth Century History* (New York: H. Holt, 1998), 73; John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 23-31; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 187-190.

3. For more on this model, see Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 9.